WERE THE ROMAN CATACOMBS ABANDONED IN THE NINTH CENTURY A.D.?

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Most art historians are generally aware of the rich corpus of late classical and early medieval painting to be found in the suburban cemeteries around the city of Rome, in those underground passages which we know as the "catacombs." Few, however, ever stop to inquire when it was that the catacombs finally ceased to be used, and thus ceased to receive painted decorations. Was it in the fourth century A.D. when Constantine legitimized the Christian religion in the Roman world? Was it in the sixth century when the city of Rome was devastated by the Gothic wars? Was it in the ninth century when the new monastic foundations of the Carolingian empire vied with one another to obtain the relics of early saints and martyrs? Or did the catacombs continue to be visited until almost the end of the Middle Ages? In this paper evidence will be presented which suggests that this last alternative is applicable for at least some of the sites in question.[1]

The standard historical view of the history of the catacombs divides the period of their use into two distinct phases. Of these, it is the first with which most people are familiar: the period in which Rome's suburban cemeteries were hewn from the tufa and used for their original purpose as places of burial.[2] This initial phase of catacomb history is thought to have begun in the early years of the third century A.D., and it continued until approximately the second quarter of the sixth century. The use of the catacombs for burial did not cease with the "Peace of the Church" in the fourth century. In fact, this served rather to increase the demand for Christian cemeteries, many of which came into use only in the years after the Edict of Milan. The Catacomb of S. Valentino on the via Flaminia is an excellent example of this phenomenon. The use of this cemetery began in the fourth century in the reign of the emperor Constantine, and its dated burials span the years from 318 to 523 A.D., with the largest number falling into the period from approximately 350 to 450 A.D.[3] The same pattern of use may be found at the other suburban sites used by Rome's Christian community, with the number of underground burials dwindling at the end of the fifth century and then ceasing altogether by the fourth decade of the sixth. The last securely-dated burial to have been discovered thus far in any of the catacombs is one of the year 535 from the Catacomb of S. Sebastiano.[4] During these early centuries, the mural paintings with which the underground chambers were decorated were generally related to their function as cemeteries: for the most part Biblical scenes of salvation, or prefigurations of Christ's triumph over death. From the middle of the fourth century this repertoire was expanded to include statements of Christian belief as well as frequent depictions of the deceased. An excellent example of this last category is the large mural in the Catacomb of Commodilla depicting the presentation of the deceased, a widow by the name of Turtura, to the enthroned Madonna and Child by her "guarantors," saints Felix and Adauctus (whose relics reposed in the same crypt). Although the lengthy inscription beneath the figures does not provide a date for the burial, the painting may be assigned to the sixth century on the basis of its style and iconography, and it seems likely to have been executed after the restoration of this site by Pope

John I (A.D. 523-526).[5]

By the middle of the sixth century, Roman burial practice had shifted from cemeteries outside the city to cemeteries within the perimeter of the Aurelian walls. This may have been a consequence of the devastating Gothic wars which sharply reduced the population of the city while at the same time frequently denying the inhabitants access to the suburban cemeteries. It is no coincidence that the last of the dated catacomb burials precedes by only two years the first of the three Gothic sieges (that of Vitigis, A.D. 537-538), and from the second half of the sixth century there is considerable evidence for the use of surface cemeteries within the walls.[6]

This dramatic shift in Roman funerary custom marks the beginning of the second phase of catacomb use. They continued to be maintained and visited, but for a different purpose: as places of pilgrimage and veneration on account of the relics of the early saints and martyrs which they contained. This was not a new function - the tomb of St. Peter, for example, had been marked by a huge basilica in the early fourth century, and many other graves had similarly become the sites for churches or commemorative chapels - but after the sixth century this became their only function. With the growing importance of the cult of relics, and with the increasing belief not only in their sanctity, but in their supernatural and magical powers as well, the catacombs soon became major attractions for the rapidly increasing number of pilgrims and other visitors to the city. One reflection of this pattern may be found in the location of the principal papal building projects undertaken in the century after A.D. 550. The construction of new churches is most frequently to be found outside the city and in direct relation to the tombs of important saints, for example the new shrines at the graves of St. Lawrence (Pelagius II, 579-590 A.D.) and St. Agnes (Honorius I, 625-638). At the same time, new ecclesiastical foundations within the city tend to re-use existing structures, for example the Pantheon, converted into a church dedicated to Mary by pope Boniface IV in A.D. 609, or the Curia Senatus, dedicated as the church of S. Adriano in the time of Honorius I.[7] It can be no coincidence that the earliest pilgrim itineraries which have survived, the Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae and the De Locis Sanctis Martyrum, were both compiled in the first half of the seventh century. Both are largely concerned with the suburban cemeteries and their relics.[8]

This new emphasis is clearly reflected in the mural paintings which were added to these places of pilgrimage in the course of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries. These are no longer of a funerary or theological nature, but rather for the most part depictions of the various saints venerated at that location: Milis, Pumenius, Abdon and Sennen in the Catacomb of Ponziano; Rufinianus, Faustinianus, Simplicius and Beatrix in the Catacomb of Generosa; Felicitas and her seven sons in the Catacomb of S. Felicita; and Cornelius, Cyprian, Sixtus and Optatus in the Catacomb of S. Callisto.[9] At the tomb of St. Callixtus in the Catacomb of Calepodio, remnants have been discovered of a narrative cycle illustrating the passion of this third-century pope and martyr.[10] In each case the nature of the decoration is clearly related to the function of the site as a cult shrine.

The process by which the catacombs decline in importance as places of pilgrimage has its roots in the middle of the eighth century. This period witnessed the first attempts to remove the relics from their locations in shrines outside the walls, and to "translate" them to the altars of ecclesiastical structures above ground, primarily to churches within the walls of Rome but in some cases to the new and powerful monastic institutions of

the Carolingian empire north of the Alps. These translations are recorded in the papal biographies of the Liber Pontificalis, as well as in inscriptions placed in those churches to which relics were brought. They begin in the time of pope Paul I (757-767),[11] and reach their peak in the first half of the ninth century in the reign of Paschal I (817-824). An inscription which Paschal placed in S. Prassede boasts that he brought no less than 2300 bodies from the catacombs to that church alone.[12] The last recorded translation in this period occurs in the time of pope Leo IV (847-855), the last of the line of builder-popes of the Carolingian period.

The traditional view of catacomb history maintains that by the middle of the ninth century, as a result of these translations, the suburban cemeteries had been abandoned, and that subsequently their locations were forgotten. The implication of this view for art historians is that no catacomb paintings can be dated after this time, and any mention of a translation of relics from a particular site has usually been taken as a terminus ante quem for its use.

On occasion this leads to complications, for example the case of the large painted niche in the Catacomb of S. Ermete (Fig. 1) discovered in February 1940. The composition is divided into two parts. In the upper zone there is a half-figure of Christ flanked by two angels. He holds an open book, upon which is inscribed (in Latin) the Biblical text "I am the Good Shepherd." Beneath are the enthroned Madonna and Child with two archangels and three saints, the latter identified by inscriptions as Hermes (Ermete), John the Evangelist, and Benedict. The mural was published by Enrico Josi as a work of the eighth century, possibly to be dated to the reign of pope Hadrian I (772-795) who restored the site, with a terminus ante quem provided by the translation of the relics of Hermes to the church of S. Marco during the pontificate of Gregory IV (827-884).[13] However, this early dating has puzzled those art historians who have considered the style of the work, among them Edward Garrison whose views appeared in print in 1947:[14]

> "My impression that these frescoes must be of later date - indeed most probably of the twelfth century - was confirmed by an inspection of the frescoes themselves. For whatever reminiscences of earlier techniques they may display, they yet bear no relation to the principal style streams of the Roman eighth century, as seen, for example, in S. Maria Antiqua and S. Saba. Their monumentality and the proportions of the figures, especially of the heads, are Romanesque."

Garrison then goes on to compare the dress and features of Mary to the twelfth-century apse mosaic in S. Francesca Romana, and the same comparison has also served as the starting point for the recent detailed stylistic analysis undertaken by Oystein Hjort.[15] Both writers have concluded that the S. Ermete must belong to the second half of the twelfth century, which is to say some four hundred years after Hadrian I, and their view is confirmed by a number of iconographic details which also suggest a later date. These include the wearing of the jewelled loros by one of the archangels, the presence of St. Benedict, and the use of the two-tiered formula for the decoration of the apse, all of which are without parallel in Rome before at least the end of the tenth century.

In normal circumstances, historical evidence for site use should be preferred to other considerations, but in the case of the S. Ermete mural the stylistic arguments are very compelling. One can only conclude that in this particular instance one approach or the other must be erroneous as a method of dating, and it may be useful to re-assess the basic assumption upon which Josi's theory was based, namely S. Ermete was abandoned in the

ninth century. Did the removal of Hermes"s relics bring all use of the site to an end? I suggest that perhaps it did not, and in the medieval archive of the Roman church of S. Silvestro in Capite there are three documents - dated to the years 1169, 1172 and 1198 - which use the cemetery of S. Ermete as a topographical reference when specifying the location of certain properties.[16] So clearly its location was well known, and it seems unlikely that the site would have been used in this fashion if it had been lying entirely derelict for more than four centuries. It is also to be found in the Turin Catalogue, a list of Rome's churches and monasteries compiled in the first half of the fourteenth century, which notes that S. Ermete, like so many other churches in and around the city, "non habet servitorem."[17] This implies that while services were no longer being conducted, the problem was the shortage of clergy and not the deliberate abandonment of the site.

The same question arises with regard to another catacomb painting, this time a bit further from Rome in the Catacomb of S. Senatore at Albano Laziale, which depicts a variation on the Byzantine iconography of the deesis (intercession) in which John the Baptist has been replaced by a local saint, Smaragdus (Fig. 2). I have argued elsewhere that on the basis of style and palaeography, this painting too should be assigned to the eleventh or the twelfth century, and not to the ninth century, the date hitherto widely accepted on the basis of a terminus ante quem provided by a possible translation.[18]

In order to settle the issue, what is required is, of course, textual evidence to demonstrate that the catacombs were still known and visited in the period after the ninth century, and surprisingly there is quite a bit of this, although it is clear that the volume of such visits was enormously reduced. However, the catacombs remained an item on the itineraries of medieval pilgrims, just as they do for visitors to the city of Rome today, and sources such as the Liber Pontificalis speak of repairs undertaken at a number of sites even after their principal relics had been translated. For example, the relics of St. Sebastian were removed from his shrine on the via Appia in the first half of the ninth century, some of them going north across the Alps to the church of St. Médard at Soissons, but this did not prevent S. Sebastiano from being repaired later in the century by Pope Nicholas I (858-867),[19] and it remained a place of veneration throughout the Middle Ages. It was one of four suburban cemeteries visited by the archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric, in the year 990 when he came to Rome to be invested by the pope.[20]

Knowledge of the existence of the suburban cemeteries was kept alive by guidebooks which listed the sights which pilgrims and tourists could expect to see in the city. Chief among these was the Mirabilia, compiled towards the middle of the twelfth century, which devotes its entire tenth chapter to the subject of cemeteries, presenting an extensive list of them.[21] One fourteenth-century manuscript, containing a later version of this text, adds a note to explain that the cemeteries are below ground, and that they contain the graves of Christian martyrs.[22] Thus even at the end of the Middle Ages a considerable number of the catacombs were still recorded and listed for visitors. Among the last medieval references to them is that of the anonymous Benedictine who compiled the Memoriale de mirabilibus et indulgentiis quae in urbe Romana existunt in the second half of the fourteenth century. He includes mention of the catacombs of Priscilla and S. Callisto, but notes that few now venture to enter them.[23] It is only to be expected that the overwhelming decline of religious life in Rome, which took place in those years during which the papal court was

resident in distant Avignon, should have resulted in the final abandonment of the catacombs, thus making necessary their rediscovery in subsequent centuries.

To return to the question posed in the title of this paper, "Were the catacombs abandoned in the ninth century?," the answer is a qualified negative. Sources indicate that at least some of the cemeteries continued to be visited for another five hundred years, and thus there can be no objection on historical grounds to the dating of mural paintings such as the one in S. Ermete to the later Middle Ages, with or without the presence of the relics of the titular saint.

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NOTES

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2. For a good recently-published introduction to the catacombs see J. Stevenson, The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity (London 1978).

3. See R. Krautheimer and S. Corbett, Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae iv (Vatican City 1970), 290.

4. Antonio Ferrua, Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae N.S. V (Rome 1971), 47 no. 13, 123.

5. For the most recent discussion of the date see Eugenio Russo, "L'affresco di Turtura nel cimitero di Commodilla, l'icona di S. Maria in Trastevere e le più antiche feste della Madonna a Roma," Bollettino dell' Instituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano 88 (1979), 35-85, esp. 35-49.

6. See J. Osborne, "From Turtura to Alfanus: funerary monuments in early mediaeval Rome," RACAR 9 (1982), 3-8, esp. 3.

7. For a general discussion of the activities at the suburban cult shrines see Martine Dulaey, "L'entretien des cimetières romains du 5e au 7e siècle," Cahiers Archéologiques 26 (1977), 7-18, and Louis Reekmans, "L'implantation monumentale chrétienne dans la zone suburbaine de Rome du IVe au IXe siècle," Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 44 (1968), 173-207.

8. These two texts have been published by R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, Codice Topografico della Città di Roma ii (Rome 1942), 67-131.

9. These paintings are illustrated in Raffaella Farioli, Pitture di Epoca Tarda nelle Catacombe Romane (Ravenna 1963), figs. 2, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15.

10. See Aldo Nestori, "La Catacomba di Calepodio al III miglio dell' Aurelia vetus e i sepolcri dei papi Callisto I e Giulio I," Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 47 (1971), 169-278.

11. Liber Pontificalis, ed. Louis Duchesne (Paris 1886) i, 464.

12. See Antonio Ferrua, "Il catalogo dei martiri di S. Prassede," Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia. Rendiconti 30-31 (1957-1958), 129-140.

13. See Enrico Josi, "Scoperta d' un altare e di pitture nella Basilica di S. Ermete," Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 17 (1940), 195-208.

14. Edward Garrison, "Post-war discoveries: early Italian paintings - I," The Burlington Magazine 89 (1947), 147-148.

15. Oystein Hjort, "The first portrait of St. Benedict? Another look at the frescoes of Sant' Ermete in Rome and the development of a 12th-century facial type," Hafnia 8 (1981), 72-82.

16. See V. Federici, "Regesto del monastero di S. Silvestro de Capite," Archivio della R. Società Romana di Storia Patria 22 (1899), 489-538, esp. 504, 517.

17. See G. Falco, "Il catalogo di Torino delle chiese, degli ospedali, dei monasteri di Roma nel secolo XIV," Archivio della R. Società Romana di Storia Patria 32 (1909), 411-443, esp. 427.

18. J. Osborne, "Notes on early medieval wall-painting in Lazio: the Catacomb of San Senatore at Albano," Medieval Lazio (Oxford 1982), 287-292.

19. Liber Pontificalis ii, 161.

20. See B. Pesci, "L'itinerario romano di Sigerico arcivescovo di Canterbury e la lista dei papi da lui portata in Inghilterra (anno 990)," Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 13 (1936), 43-60.

21. Valentini-Zucchetti, Codice Topografico iii (Rome 1946), 26-28.

22. Ibid., iii, 187-188.

23. Ibid., iv (Rome 1953), 87.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Niche Mural, Catacomb of S. Ermete, Rome.

Fig. 2. Deësis, Catacomb of S. Senatore, Albano Laziale.

Photos courtesy Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2